

On Hold
Aashna Soni
Fiction

Music as passion.

Neelam immigrated to the United States at the age of 24 after completing her bachelor's degree in electrical engineering. Instead of finding a stable job, she decided to pursue music, much to the shock of her parents. Music was the one thing that grounded her, made her feel like she was in control of her life. She spent nights in the studio, writing lyrics and composing songs. Removed from friends. Avoiding relationships. Choosing passion and fulfillment over money.

Music allowed her to emotionally relive her experiences, but this time think about why each experience mattered to her overall journey. She fused Indian *ragas* with American pop beats to reflect her immigration to the United States. She packed her songs with soul, with deep reflections on the obstacles she had faced growing up and how she had overcome them. Music was a way for her to simultaneously discover and share her story as it was unfolding.

When her daughter, Aisha, was born, Neelam finally had someone to sing for. She hoped that her daughter would grow up and listen to her music, and through the music learn intimately who her mother was. She hoped that Aisha would discover for herself the power of music and use it to empower herself.

Music as remembrance.

October 5th, 2000.

Neelam sang her song “wishes and dreams” in a smooth, pitch-perfect voice. A mockingbird perched on a branch in the tree behind her to listen. Aisha screamed in delight as her mother hoisted her onto her shoulders and ran through the grass, allowing Aisha to brush her fingers against the autumn leaves and feel the wind caress her face.

January 18th, 2005.

Shards of glass littered the hallway and kitchen floors. Aisha stepped carefully, trying to avoid the pieces of glass, but her slippers ever so often crunched on them, making noise in the otherwise eerily quiet house. It was the absence of song – her mother's bright, confident voice –

that brought out an unexplainable fear in her. The absence of music was a warning that something evil lurked beneath the silence.

Aisha peeked from behind the cupboard and saw her mother sitting at the table, grabbing her hair – in anger? Frustration? Sadness? Desperation? Aisha couldn't tell. An opaque bottle rested in front of her mother, and drops of brown liquid stained the wooden table. Aisha squinted to read the label. "Bud Light," written in bold white letters. Neelam turned her face, and Aisha saw bloodshot eyes. All of a sudden, Neelam let out a groan, followed by a broken scream that echoed off the kitchen walls. Suddenly afraid for her life, Aisha broke into tears and ran into her bedroom.

October 7th, 2017.

Aisha woke up in a cold sweat, struggling to readjust herself to the present. It was 5:50. Might as well wake up, she decided. She peeked through the curtains: the silence of the dark morning disturbed her. While her classmates and colleagues slept peacefully, here she was, awake.

Aisha brushed her teeth, changed, and went into the cramped kitchen. She despised their kitchen – the ancient appliances were covered in dust from lack of use, the paint was peeling off the walls, and the tiles on the kitchen counter were lined with grime. Trying to minimize her time in there, Aisha fixed herself a quick breakfast – a single piece of bread slathered with strawberry jam. She then pulled out bottles of thiamine pills and vitamin supplements from the cabinet, dumped them into a steel bowl, and poured a glass of lukewarm water. Barely managing to carry everything at once, she went into her mother's room.

"Mama, wake up," she whispered.

Her mother didn't open her eyes. Aisha grasped her arm and tugged at it.

"Mama, it's 6:15. Wake up," Aisha repeated.

Neelam's eyes opened slowly. Aisha put the bowl with pills in front of her and placed the glass of water on the bedside table.

"Time to take your meds," Aisha said. To keep her mother company, she sat in the chair next to the bed while she ate her jam toast.

Neelam was diagnosed with Korsakoff syndrome (KS) nearly 6 months ago due to "alcohol use disorder," the doctors had said. One day, on the way back from work, Neelam had gotten into a car crash – a product of stress, frustration, and drinking. Though she had avoided major injuries, something looked awry. The doctors conducted physical exams, blood tests, and a CT scan and concluded that her chronic alcohol use had resulted in Wernicke encephalopathy (WE) and had progressed to KS. If only Neelam had tried just slightly to manage her compulsive drinking habits, the progression to KS could have been avoided, said the doctors. If only. But Neelam would never entertain the idea of visiting a doctor of any sort – "I'm perfectly fine," she would say in her more sober moments, though her blank eyes suggested otherwise.

As she ate, Aisha looked into her mother's dark brown eyes, which focused on the wall clock behind her. They were drooping, and pronounced eyebags made it seem like she was perpetually tired, even though all she did was sleep. Aisha recalled a time when those eyes gazed at her with unconditional love and care. But she couldn't help but also recall a time when those eyes turned red with anger at the world, at circumstance – and Aisha was a powerless observer.

The room's silence allowed the battle between these memories to be front and center in Aisha's mind. She hummed "wishes and dreams" to herself to refocus her attention on the best of her mother's past – the singing, the laughing, the warm-colored leaves – the way she wanted to remember her mother.

Aisha's train of thought was disrupted by sound coming from her mother's direction. The words slurred together, making whatever she was saying incomprehensible. Slurred speech, Aisha was told by the doctor, was a common symptom of KS. She sighed.

Around ten minutes later, Neelam suddenly straightened her posture and lighted up her eyes, so much so that it caught Aisha's attention.

"Remember...when I...perf...ormed in the...stadium?" she said, her voice drawn out, the effort in every word visible in her throat. "There were...thousands of people...there. You...wouldn't come...onstage," she paused to catch her breath. "You wouldn't stop...kicking and...screaming...so I just...left you back...stage," she said, looking eagerly into Aisha's eyes.

"Yes, I remember," Aisha responded with a small smile. This incident had never happened. Confabulation was a common symptom of KS. It hurt Aisha to see her mother stripped of her ability to distinguish between dreams and reality, between remembering and concocting memories.

"Remember...what?" Neelam replied.

"Nothing."

Music as hope.

April 20th, 2019.

On the bus to college, Aisha took her regular seat and put in her earplugs. Following her usual morning routine, she opened the recordings app – a place where she stored all of her mother's songs.

A few weeks ago, she had discovered a box of CDs – her mother's recordings from her prime years – tucked away in her closet. Aisha played them one by one on her computer and became instantly entranced.

Since then, Aisha felt as if her mother had placed her on hold and began to play her songs as hold music. Aisha couldn't mute it because then she wouldn't know when her mother finally answered. She could lower the volume, but it would still be there, playing in the background, to

the point where it could drive her crazy. Or she could play it on full volume, invest herself completely in the wait, remain hopeful for an answer.

Aisha waited and waited for her mother to one day pick up, to be present mentally and emotionally, to reassume the role of mother. The music was so beautiful and yet so painful for it reminded Aisha of a time when her mother didn't have slurred, broken speech, the sounds all jumbled together, destroying any meaning in the individual words. She could sing passionately and powerfully, make anyone drop their tasks and listen and feel the emotions she wanted them to feel.

Aisha chose to stay on the phone line, even if it took weeks, months, or years for her mother to pick up. She chose to wait for such a time as when her mother was ready to form new and beautiful memories with her.

Yet always, in the back of her mind, there was that dread that her mother may never pick up. That Aisha would get disconnected and have to restart from square one: dial the number and wait, only to be disconnected again.

After a long day of school, periodically checking in on her mother at home, an evening shift at Starbucks, and dinner, Aisha went to bed. With her phone still on charge, she put her earbuds back in. She played one of her mother's mellower songs – an Indian lullaby-inspired tune – on repeat while she waited for her body to release melatonin and drag her into slumber. Aisha stared up at the ceiling, her canvas for dreaming. She could envision her mother there, smiling, her arms no longer thin and bony, her gait steady as she walked toward Aisha to draw her into an embrace, her lips full, her eyes wide open and awake, signs of fatigue erased. The image was an elusive dream, hope dangling from a thread, the very person Aisha waited and waited patiently for.

Music as freedom.

July 21st, 2022.

Aisha sat in her car and stared at the building in front of her. It was a modern gray and white building in the shape of a circle; in the center was a garden with flowers of all colors, mini-waterfalls, and a grand fountain. Aisha kept repeating to herself that her mother would be fine here, in the nursing facility – it had everything she could possibly need. Her mother would be well taken care of.

Aisha rested her hands in her lap – it simply took too much effort to raise them onto the steering wheel and drive herself back home. She now lived alone. It felt weird, and slightly discomforting, to not have to rush back home to check on her mother every few hours.

At the same time, Aisha felt a new, freeing sensation. The creases so deeply ingrained in her forehead began to flatten out. The tension began to fade from the tight muscles in her arm, allowing her shoulders to drop and relax with relief. She no longer had to accompany her mother to biweekly doctor's appointments. She didn't have to constantly worry about whether her mother was taking her medications and eating, whether she was safe at home by herself. She didn't have to deny attending every event and every gathering because she had to get back home. She could perhaps stop hoping for something impossible – the picturesque mother-daughter relationship she envisioned. She could close that chapter full of false hope and take her life off hold.

Music as a record.

November 4th, 2022.

Aisha got onto the bus just in time. She sat down and, as always, put in her earbuds. This time, before selecting one of her usual curated playlists, she decided to check out her liked songs for a change – a 13-hour-long collection she would keep adding to but never actually listen to, as her tastes kept evolving and she wanted to immerse herself in the new releases or hot hits.

Her playlist always seemed to her to be completely random – there was no rhyme or reason to it, no pattern or order. Today, she decided to look through it more carefully.

The playlist began with pop songs punctuated by moments of rap. Songs that Aisha could vibe to, could help her get through her daily tasks without having to think too much. Songs that energized her and could drown out the noise of the world around her.

A sudden jump to fusion songs – her mother’s songs – when Aisha had discovered that her mother had published actual albums despite her small fan following. Aisha felt a deep emotional connection to these soulful songs, songs that brought her hope – hope for a renewed relationship with her mother, hope that the world could change for the better. Aisha’s memory of her mother was newly ignited and alive.

Once this era was over, her playlist transitioned to instrumental pieces. The absence of words allowed Aisha to interpret the music in her own way and fill in the silence of words with her thoughts. Was she a failure as a daughter? Was she abandoning her mother? What should she do with this newfound time? Music never gave her the answers, but it did help her make peace with having more questions than answers.

Her music taste now was a little bit of everything. She was not beholden to any one artist or genre. She would listen to recommended music, discover new artists from places around the world, and try out music suggested by friends. Music was a medium of discovery – a way for her to learn new things, to gain insight into different cultures. Her journey of musical discovery was a fitting parallel for her rediscovery of the world around her.

Perhaps this was what her mother was trying to teach her. That music was a tool of reflection. A way to deal with the ups and downs of life. A partner who you could confide in and who was always there for you. It was a way to keep and treasure different parts of your life story, a story that conveyed a slightly new meaning every time it was retold.
